

THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

A Conversation with Honorable Andreas Siegel, Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Miami



**Hon. Andreas Siegel, Consul General
of the Federal Republic of Germany in Miami**

Andreas Siegel, the Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Miami, sat down for an interview with the Miami-Florida Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at FIU to discuss the 31st anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, which will be celebrated on Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. He also reflected on the 30th anniversary of German reunification and transatlantic ties.

MFJMCE: You were born in Berlin and grew up about half mile from the Wall. In a few words, could you tell us what the Fall of the Berlin Wall means to you?

It evokes a sentiment of immense joy and gratitude! The Fall of the Wall is one of the most significant events of the 20th century! It finally led to a unified Europe, which had been divided by an “iron curtain” since the end of WW II.

From a personal perspective, the wall has been a determining factor of my life: I grew up on a small, but rather diverse political “island”, which cut our family off from the surrounding areas. But it meant also being exposed not only to West German media but also to those of the East as well as to British, French and US media, such as the American Forces Network (AFN). That, in addition to a number of visits to East Berlin and East Germany (the GDR), allowed me to compare views and perspectives and to do a reality check.

The role of the US for stabilizing the situation in Berlin and preserving the well-being of the West-Berlin population in times of crisis can hardly be overstated: in 1948/49 the US-led airlift saved the population from starving, when the Soviet Union had cut off all land, rail and water connections to and from West Berlin. President John F. Kennedy assured Berliners of US solidarity after the Berlin Wall had been built. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan requested – once more - to tear it down. And after the fall of the Wall, President George H. W. Bush and Foreign Secretary James Baker made sure all the Western Allies endorsed the path towards unification. All this was key to where we are today.

MFJMCE: What happened the day the Berlin Wall fell?

It was one of the lucky days of History, where things did not work out as the East German regime had expected. In a nutshell: the Fall of the Wall was caused by bad communication and bad management on the Eastern side. On the one hand: a press conference concerning a Politbuero decision about removing travel restrictions for East Germans turned into a political satire and a catastrophe for the East German regime: the spokesperson of the Politbuero, Schabowski, had not participated in the meeting and just read out a press release given to him. Asked about the date of entry into force of the new regulations, he mumbled: “Right away, immediately...”. He had not read the reverse side of the paper, specifying that this needed further administrative preparation of at least 24 hours. As the news were quickly repeated in the daily news of the western television (watched by many East Germans), many East Berliners went to check the situation at the border control points, which, until then, had allowed for one-way crossing only. Another important factor for the rapid acceleration of events was the fact that the whole hierarchy of the Politbuero was apparently out of reach that evening (no mail, no social media communication being available at the time) and no instructions had been sent to the border guards. So the situation got more and more agitated until one border guard, after many failed attempts to get instructions, lifted the barrier. A few hours later, and the whole night of the 9th of November, 1989, tens of thousands of East Berliners and East Germans went on a “sneak visit” to West Berlin, which had been closed for them for 28 years.

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MFJMCE: We just celebrated the 30th anniversary of the German reunification of East and West Germany on Oc. 3rd, almost one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall. What is the significance of unification in the collective memory?

Many observers say that the past 30 years have been “the best 30 years Germany – and Europe - has had so far”. Others point to the fact, that the unification process was “not perfect” and too quick to take into account also some positive achievements of the East. The fact is that it had to happen very quickly after the opening of the border because of the free movement of persons and the immense economic imbalance, which would have caused a mass exodus of the East. And because sovereignty and security issues of a united Germany required the rapid agreement of all 4 victorious powers of WW II as well as the neighboring countries. As it happened, the small window of opportunity was used very well: within 11 months after the Fall of the Wall, German Unity was formally established, after very intense months of debates and negotiations.

MFJMCE: How has unification changed politics and German political parties?

As an immediate effect, the political spectrum moved to the left: a number of supporters and nostalgics of the former East German regime united in a successor party to the “Socialist Unity Party” (SED), later to be named “DIE LINKE” (“The Left”). Over time, it became apparent that the rise of populism in Europe and the world also favored the rise of right-wing, mostly anti-immigration parties, the biggest in Germany being the “Alternative for Germany” (AFD), a party which has its stronghold in the former East Germany. Unfortunately, these political currents have also entailed a number of anti-Semitic hate speeches and crimes. It needs to be noted that the East German regime had always refused to take responsibility for the Holocaust and the racism of the Nazi regime so that Holocaust remembrance and education had mainly been a West German phenomenon. Having said that, the left-wing and right-wing (ultra-conservative) parties have been represented at regional and federal Parliaments for many years now, to some extent reflecting political trends in surrounding countries in Europe. The traditional “mainstream” parties (CDU, SPD, FDP, Greens) however still represent 70% of the seats in the Federal Parliament (Bundestag).



More information on Celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall from the German Embassy in Washington D.C. :
<https://www.germany.info/us-en/welcome/berlinwall>

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MFJMCE: Are there still differences between the East and the West?

Yes, but there are also many differences between cities and rural areas, between high tech and traditional industrial areas in the Western Länder.

In the first 5 years after unification, industrial productivity in the East grew by about 100%. Equally: income growth and massive infrastructure investments helped to transform many parts of East Germany into attractive hubs (Dresden, Leipzig). One East German social institution definitely has had a lasting impact: the kindergarten. The network of childcare facilities per capita had been double of the density in the West. With increasingly more women working in the west and more single parents, this trend has very much strengthened in the West. Some Eastern cities have also developed into cultural hubs (like Dresden, Weimar, Leipzig, East Berlin). Weimar was chosen as a European Capital of Culture in 1999, the Saxonian city of Chemnitz will shortly be declared European Capital of Culture for the year 2025.

MFJMCE: How is unified Germany viewed by its neighbors?

Immediately after unification, the high consumer demand and infrastructure needs in the former East German regions generated, over several years, an additional GDP growth of EU members of about 1%. In the meantime, the situation has largely “normalized”, and the unified Germany is widely accepted as a key

Member State. Germany has always made clear that its true identity is Europe, working very closely also with France, as a “tandem”, wherever possible. With the single market, Schengen and the Euro as well as the European Union, this has increased Germany’s role and economic strength and also its “soft power”: The Soccer World Cup in 2006, hosted by unified Germany, became known as the “summer fairy tale”, even though Germany did not make it to the finals. But many people revised their preconceptions of a “typical German”, often connotated with discipline and seriousness, and witnessed a relaxed, friendly and hospitable nation. The stable political leadership by Chancellor Merkel since 2004, the economic strength and the widely accepted social model (with strong trade unions, well-developed public transport, health insurance coverage etc.) have earned Germany a lot of respect.

MFJMCE: What drastic changes have you seen in Berlin since the Fall of the Wall?

Foreigners today do not recognize any more where exactly the Wall used to be. Considerable reconstruction (including the central Berlin castle, now: “Humboldt Forum”, an agora of international cultural dialogue) and restructuring of the Eastern downtown area have made this center a new economic, administrative and cultural hub, attracting millions of tourists and young professionals. A big challenge has been to reconnect and strengthen the public transport

THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

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 Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Miami



system, in particular the east-west links. A new central railway station has been open since 2006. Now, after some complications, a new airport was just opened a few days ago as well.

Overall, Berlin has become one of the most vibrant cities in Europe, a real magnet, in particular for young people from all over the world.

MFJMCE: What has been the relationship between the West and the East Berliner since then?

By now, the city has become very much one big city and is very diverse, with constant movement of popular quarters from one district to another. There are many foreigners and West Germans in Berlin too, contributing, among others, to a steep increase of real estate prices, but also to an ever-expanding cultural life, with 3 opera houses, the philharmonic building, numerous theatres, cinemas and museums,... and around 10.000 pubs, bars and restaurants.

MFJMCE: We have a large German population here in Miami and Florida. The partnership between the United States and the European Union is essential. Could you tell us a few words on strengthening our partnership? What are Germany's main connections to Miami?

The Fall of the Wall and German Unification are indeed always an opportunity to remember, with

gratitude, the strong transatlantic ties we have had over the past 75 years. Pieces of the Wall in Miami, like the one in front of the central campus of the Miami Dade College, are a reminder of this friendship. Altogether, there are approximately 200.000 Germans in Florida, with about 450.000 additional tourists coming every year. Germany has become the 3rd biggest job creator in the US and in Florida. In particular in times of pandemic and economic uncertainty it is appropriate to rethink and enhance economic, academic and cultural cooperation. One way forward could be to consider new ways to use the good experience of German dual vocational training for workforce development in Florida. A key asset to increase mutual understanding and cooperation is to strengthen German as a foreign language in the curricula of schools and colleges. It is a big door opener for various opportunities.

MFJMCE: Do you have any last thoughts you would like to share with us?

I will never forget the wonderful story of German-American friendship after WW II, the Marshall Plan, the unprecedented Berlin Air Lift and the continuing support and friendship up to unification and beyond. Today, we can do even more to build the future and face new challenges together: Florida and Germany: **Wunderbar together!**

By Christine I. Caly-Sanchez



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Andreas Siegel, Consul General of Germany in Miami
In front of a piece of the Berlin Wall that is preserved at the Wolfson Campus in Miami Dade College—Miami



Andreas Siegel
Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Miami

Andreas Siegel is a career diplomat with a broad range of international experience in strategic, political, economic and cultural affairs. He holds both a (postgraduate) diploma of the College of Europe, Bruges/Belgium and a Master degree of French, English and American literature/linguistics of the University of Freiburg/Germany.

Andreas has had a long-time connection and affinity with the United States: he was an AFS exchange student in Michigan during the Bi-Centennial year 1975/1976. In the early 1990ies he served as a Vice-Consul at the German Consulate General in Boston, Mass.

Before coming to Florida in July 2019, Andreas headed the German Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Prior to that he was Head of the Strategic Planning Division for External Cultural Policy in the Directorate General for Culture and Communication at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin.

From 2010 to 2013 he was posted in Brussels/Belgium as First Counsellor at the Permanent Representation to NATO, coordinating in particular arms control and counter-terrorism matters. Prior to this, he worked for 6 years in Strasbourg/France, first as Deputy Chief of Mission at the Permanent Representation to the Council of Europe (CoE), then – on leave from the Foreign Service – as Director of Strategic Planning, reporting directly to the Secretary General of the CoE. From 2001 to 2004, Andreas led a working unit in the European Directorate General in Berlin, serving as the German spokesperson for European cultural policy and coordinating German cross-border cooperation with neighboring countries.

During the first years of his career, Andreas occupied two posts in (the then capital) Bonn and three abroad: after two years of diplomatic training, he started off as a desk officer for Poland at the Foreign Office to move on to Boston/USA as Vice-Consul. He then spent three years in Lilongwe/Malawi (South-Eastern Africa) as Deputy Head of Mission and Chargé d'affaires. Back to Bonn, he worked at the Federal Chancellery, dealing with international strategic issues. Another assignment led him to Rabat and Casablanca/Morocco, where he served as Head of the economic section of the Embassy and Consul General, respectively.